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As the Legislature Comes Together to Act on COVID-19 Relief, We Must Keep Working

Rep. Katrina Shankland (D-Stevens Point)

We are amid unprecedented times: a public health crisis of historic magnitude that will have untold consequences for Wisconsin families, communities, and our state. That does not mean we are alone. We are all in this together. I am thinking of our neighbors and community members constantly. If I can assist you in any way, please reach out.

With a grateful heart, I continue to be amazed and appreciative of our front-line health care workers, first responders, essential workers, and everyone working around the clock to support our community through this difficult time. From volunteers sewing cloth masks to community businesses donating materials for face shields, Portage County is enriched by its giving and selfless spirit. I am proud to call such a compassionate and community-minded place home.

Today, on the 34th day of our state-declared public health emergency and the 21st day of the Safer at Home order, the Wisconsin State Assembly convened in a virtual session to pass legislation providing relief related to the COVID-19 pandemic. I was pleased to vote to support the hard-working people of Wisconsin, and I'm eager to do more.

This legislation makes several important and timely changes, including waiving the one-week waiting period for unemployment insurance during a public health emergency, which applies retroactively from March 12, 2020. For people who were laid off and struggling to make ends meet, it is essential that we remove the one-week waiting period and ensure they immediately receive unemployment insurance benefits. The bill also supports homeowners by allowing local governments to waive interest charges and penalties for late installment payments on property taxes received on or before October 1, 2020, giving property owners a pause on tax payments.

The legislation would authorize the state budget committee to allocate up to \$75 million in existing funds to help the state address the public health emergency. It also accepts enhanced federal funding of \$580 million for our state's BadgerCare program and federal child care development funds for child welfare services.

To address the urgent need for healthcare providers, the bill allows temporary Wisconsin credentials for out-of-state and former health care providers. The bill eliminates all co-pays and coinsurance for COVID-19 testing, allows pharmacists to extend most prescription refills by 30 days during the public health emergency, prohibits insurance providers and pharmacy benefit managers from discriminating based on any COVID-19 diagnoses, and ensures that folks seeking out-of-network care will not pay more for it than similar in-network services during a public health emergency.

While I believe this legislation is a good start, the state should also provide funding and support for healthcare workers, families, and businesses struggling with the effects of the COVID-19 public health crisis. I also believe we should be addressing the health risks of the coming election by strengthening vote by mail options.

That's why I helped introduce an amendment to fund grants for small businesses and tourism, invest in childcare, prevent insurance companies from refusing to cover diagnostics and treatment for COVID-19, and support our UW System students and campuses. I also voted to support an amendment to expand vote by mail efforts for every registered voter in Wisconsin for the rest of the year's coming elections. While those amendments were unsuccessful today, I will continue calling for further action on the issues that matter most to the people of Wisconsin, including prioritizing our front-line health care workers by providing more PPE, hazard pay, and protected sick leave.

It is our responsibility as public policymakers to put the health, safety, and well-being of our communities and state first, and I stand ready to do all that is needed to insulate our community and state from the most damaging effects of COVID-19. The Legislature must continue working together on additional legislation to make a meaningful difference for the people of Wisconsin. The stakes are too high to adjourn without further action.